and to carry out their scheme of retirement to it at their leisure. The operation was completed to the last detail without a hitch. Whether it ought not to have caused the abandonment of the Nivelle plan is an arguable question. It affected this new scheme in a much lesser degree than it would have affected the old plan for resumption of the Somme offensive.

The German retreat involved the whole of that old battlefield. The ground given up by the enemy over which our troops would have to march with all their elaborate equipment was so completely cut up and devastated, in roads, bridges and rails, that it took weeks to re-establish effective contact. An attack on the Somme Front could not have material-ised until the end of April.

About the middle of February an incident had occurred which gave the Germans a broad hint not only that an attack was contemplated, *Nivelle's plan* but as to the area and time where the *foe Germans* blow was to come. Here is Ludendorff's account of this strange accident—if accident it was :—

" In the middle of February, 19173 in order to improve its position, the Third Army had under-taken a local operation on the Champagne battle-fields of September, 1915. This operation was successful. Amongst the captured material there was found an order of the 2nd French Infantry Division, dated sgth January, clearly

pointing to a great French offensive on the Aisne for April. This gave us an extremely important clue. Little attention was now paid to rumours of attack in Lorraine and the Sundgau,"*

* " My War Memories/1 General Ludendorff, Vol. II, p. 410.